

Green Country Veteran

A JACK C. MONTGOMERY VA MEDICAL CENTER MAGAZINE

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VA Helps Veteran in Darkest Hour

Read his story
on pg. 6.

Green Country
Veteran is the
official magazine for
Veterans who receive
their care through the
Jack C. Montgomery
VA Medical Center.



VA
HEALTH
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Defining
EXCELLENCE
in the 21st Century



On the cover: After two combat deployments in Afghanistan, Purple Heart recipient David Jarboe struggled with depression and nightmares. After becoming homeless, he called the Veterans Crisis Line and received the help he needed. Photo by Harry Sanna

Green Country Veteran

Director James Floyd, MHA, FACHE

Associate Director Richard Crockett, MBA

Chief of Staff Thomas Schneider, D.O., FACOI

Associate Director for Patient Care Services Bonnie Pierce, MSN, RN, CENP

Managing Editor Nita McClellan

Editor, Writer & Photographer Nathan Schaeffer

Visual Information Specialist Christopher Beshears

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Please contact Nita McClellan at benita.mcclellan@va.gov or call 918-577-3704 or Nathan Schaeffer at nathan.schaeffer@va.gov if you have comments, suggestions, ideas or questions. Your feedback is always appreciated. All submissions are subject to editing and will not be returned to sender.



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VA
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VA Pharmacists Add Personal Touch, Convenience to Discharge Process

Story and photo by Nathan Schaeffer, Public Affairs Specialist

In the private sector, inpatients typically have to make a trip to their local pharmacy to get prescriptions filled after being discharged from the hospital. For a patient who just wants to get home, it can be an additional stressor or inconvenience.

At the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (JCMVAMC), prescriptions are filled by the in-house pharmacy department and personally taken to the inpatient's room by a VA Discharge Pharmacist.

Jessica Daniels, PharmD, who is one of two discharge pharmacists at JCMVAMC, said Veterans appreciate the personal touch and convenience of receiving their prescriptions before they leave the hospital.

"We pick up their discharge medications and, as a courtesy, we bring them up to their room," said Daniels. "They don't have to go to a pharmacy and wait in line. They can go straight home if they choose."

The pharmacists also provide one-on-one education with inpatients, so they know which medications they will be taking and the instructions.

"More times than not, when a patient is discharged from the hospital their medications have changed or their doses have changed," said Daniels. "We let them know what's going on with their medications. We let them know what medications have been discontinued so they don't go home and continue

taking the same thing. We also talk about drug interactions if it applies."

To ensure patients understand, Daniels said she asks each patient to repeat the instructions back to her.

"Patients receive a medication list and I make notes on it," said Daniels. "But there is no substitute for verbal education. If they've heard it once and then go home and read the medication list, it's going to confirm what they thought."

Daniels has several important tips for patients before they speak with a provider or pharmacist about their medications:

Be proactive with your own health care. Speak up and don't hesitate to ask questions.

Be an advocate for your own health care. The provider or pharmacist can't help you if you do not understand. Don't sit back. Let us know if you do not understand.

Don't hesitate to have something repeated. If the provider or pharmacist is talking too fast, or if you can't hear them, please let them know.



VA Pharmacist Jessica Daniels, PharmD, provides one-on-one education for Vietnam Veteran Robert Dunn.

Veterans who need to refill their prescriptions can call the automated refill line at 918-577-3918 or 1-888-397-8387, ext. 3918 (from outside the Muskogee area). Or Veterans can refill their prescriptions online via My HealtheVet: <https://www.myhealth.va.gov/>. ★

Flutist Performs Celtic Music for Veterans

Story and photo by Nathan Schaeffer, Public Affairs Specialist



Amy Roark, a flutist with the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra, performs traditional Celtic folk music for Veterans and their families on March 19 at the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center.

The Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center was filled with the melodies of old Ireland and the United Kingdom on March 19 as Amy Roark, a flutist with the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra, performed traditional Celtic folk music for Veterans and their families.

Roark entertained patients in several locations throughout the hospital with a flute, piccolo and penny whistle and performed Celtic jigs, reels, hornpipes and waltz music.

"With it being St. Patrick's Day Week, I thought I would play some traditional Celtic music," said Roark, who has performed with the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra since 2006. "People seem to really enjoy that."

The music by Roark is part of the ongoing "Heart Strings" concert series, which is made possible through the sponsorship of T.D. Williamson, Inc. Once a month, from October 2013 to December 2014, members of the orchestra perform for Veterans.

While Roark is accustomed to performing in large concert halls, such as the Tulsa Performing Arts Center, she said she enjoyed entertaining patients at the hospital in intimate settings like a waiting room.

"When we're playing a concert, certainly that's a lot of fun too," she said. "But there is a little bit of a distance between you and the audience. This kind of setting is great because you do get that more personable and more immediate response. You see their enjoyment much sooner, because they're right there."

Roark said she enjoys performing in hospitals and has previously performed for hospice patients she has personally known.

"Any time I can go into a hospital and play, I think it's a great service," she said. "Music is so healing and makes people happy. You see people tapping their toes and smiling."

Army Veteran Curt Russell got the opportunity to listen to Roark perform in the Main Lobby and was thoroughly entertained.

"I love this," he said. "You wouldn't hear this anywhere else in Muskogee, except here. It's fantastic."

Navy Veteran David Pait was one of three T.D. Williamson employees who visited the hospital on March 19 to watch Roark perform and, while orchestra music may not be his favorite genre, he said he not only enjoyed the music but also the reaction of the patients.

"Upstairs on the fifth floor, one of the patients said he was Celtic and it was really kind of cool to watch him," said Pait, who served in the Navy for 20 years. "He'd close his eyes and he said he remembered what it was like when he was younger. It was very impressive today. I'm very impressed with what T.D. Williamson is doing for our Veterans."

When asked what it was like to perform for a Veteran audience, Roark choked up and several tears ran down her face as she spoke about her grandfather, Woody Dennison, who served in World War II.

"He was part of the Battle of the Bulge," she said. "I've always been super proud of him and he passed away a couple years ago. I have such a respect for Veterans." ★

TULSA SYMPHONY
Heart Strings



VA Helps Veteran in Darkest Hour

Story by Nathan Schaeffer, Public Affairs Specialist

When David Jarboe enlisted in the Army in 2007, his motivation was simple. He wanted to get out of his hometown of Leitchfield, Ky.

"I didn't want to die 30 miles from my house," said Jarboe, who is 26 years old. "So I joined the Army to see the world."

But with the Nation fighting two wars, he knew a combat deployment was inevitable.

In June 2009, Jarboe deployed to Afghanistan for one year with the 4th Infantry Division, 12th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Battalion. The 16 soldiers of Delta Company lived in a remote outpost in the Pech River Valley in Kunar

Province and helped defend the Afghan people from the Taliban.

"We were there for the population," said Jarboe. "We were putting up schools, helping them protect themselves. Taliban forces would come in and kill the school teachers just because they were teaching kids."

On Aug. 20, 2009, Jarboe helped play a pivotal role in the history of Afghanistan when the nation went to the polls to freely elect their first president. Throughout that day, the soldiers fought the Taliban.

"People were getting shot by the Taliban just for voting," said Jarboe. "We rolled back and forth for 12 hours straight down a route defending the polling places. We were constantly under fire. We couldn't stop. The only time we got to stop was when we pulled in to get more ammo."

While serving at Outpost Pride Rock on Jan. 30, 2010, the Taliban attacked the outpost and Jarboe helped fend off the attack. During the firefight, Jarboe peered over the wall to make sure no one was approaching on their flank and was shot in the chest.

While his body armor saved his life, the bullet also hit a D-link carabiner on his vest, which shattered into pieces. Shrapnel





Army Veteran David Jarboe performs maintenance on the JCMVAMC Heating and Cooling System under the supervision of Jeremy Echols, an A/C Equipment Mechanic. Photo by Nathan Schaeffer

hit his arm and neck and he didn't notice he was bleeding until after the fighting stopped. Almost two months later, Jarboe was awarded the Purple Heart.

While engaged in daily combat overseas, Jarboe also had to deal with turmoil at home. His first wife got pregnant with someone else's child and asked for a divorce.

"We were together for two years," he said. "I came home and had nobody."

When Jarboe returned home, he transferred to a different unit and received orders to redeploy to Afghanistan - six months after returning from his first deployment. During his brief time home, he also met his second wife and the couple decided to get married the day before he deployed.

In January 2011, Jarboe left for Afghanistan and was stationed in the Khost Province near the Pakistan bor-

der with the 3rd Infantry Division, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion.

"We were right there on the Afghanistan and Pakistan border," said Jarboe. "We went out and checked on a nearby village and they reported Taliban movement across from Pakistan to Afghanistan coming down over the foothills. We got rocket attacks every single day."

No place in Afghanistan was safe and not even the Afghan allies could be fully trusted. Jarboe personally witnessed Afghan soldiers kill two Americans.

To prevent attacks by the Afghan Army, walls were built to separate the allies. When the Americans went to meet with the Afghan Army, they had to go in two and three-man teams.

During the tour, Jarboe mainly served as a driver for his battalion commander who routinely met with local

Afghan leaders.

"Anywhere he went, I usually went," he said. "He would tell us if he wanted to go out. We'd suit up and roll out with whatever unit was going out. If there was a shura (meeting), I'd be there."

Reintegrating Back Into Society

After 24 months in combat, reintegrating back into society was not an easy task.

"I had real bad depression," he said. "Seeing some of the stuff that you see in combat, you never forget that stuff. It doesn't go away. I constantly have nightmares."

Jarboe began drinking heavily and his second marriage deteriorated.

"She made it through a deployment, but I came back and I was real messed

up,” he said. “I didn’t go to counseling. I tried to self-medicate by drinking. I wasn’t using drugs, but I was drinking every night.”

In March 2013, Jarboe left the Army a decorated soldier with an honorable discharge. But he was unable to begin moving forward until he got help. In June 2013, Jarboe and his second wife separated.

“When I got out, I was supposed to reintegrate back into society,” he said. “I didn’t know how to do it. I started drinking heavily and I started using drugs and this went on until about June. It felt like the world was coming down.”

At that time, his sister was his only solid support system. His mother had passed away and he didn’t talk with his father. So he moved to Louisville to live with his sister and her husband.

After a few weeks, his brother-in-law got him a job working for a heating and air conditioning company.

“I liked it, but I was still having problems,” he said. “I went to work and I came home and got drunk. That was the routine for the longest time and then I started missing work.”

Jarboe began using drugs again and was also gambling. When he won a \$3,000 jackpot at a local casino, he decided to leave Louisville and visit an Army buddy in Tucson, Ariz.

He needed to be around a fellow soldier he served with in Afghanistan - someone who understood what he went through.

“My buddy Shane, he was in Fox Company,” he said. “We

went to Afghanistan together. We had each other’s backs. We went through the same thing. I got to him and I was like ‘man, what do I do? What do I do now? And he said, ‘you make money and you live your life.’ I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I started drinking again.”

With almost no money left, Jarboe decided to drive back to Kentucky. But he knew he didn’t have enough gas money to make it. His vehicle ran out of gas in Miami, Okla.

He called his sister and several friends to ask for money, but no help came.

“No one would send me money because they figured I would use it for drugs or alcohol,” he said. “I was stuck. I went to a church and they told me they didn’t do gas vouchers.”

A New Start in an Unexpected Place

Jarboe ended up spending the night in Miami at a homeless shelter and stayed there for several weeks trying to figure out his next step.

“I just remember staring in the mirror and saying ‘how could you get this far,’” he said. “It was my own doing. It was my fault in every situation. I was the cause. It’s because I didn’t seek help.”

At his darkest hour, Jarboe decided to finally ask for help. He called the Veterans Crisis Line after noticing a VA poster for the helpline at the shelter.

Soldiers from Delta Company scan the horizon for the Taliban on February 6, 2010 at Outpost Pride Rock in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. Photo by Harry Sanna

"I had never asked for help," he said. "I never thought I would. I figured I could do it all on my own. I called this number and I started talking to people. People started talking to me."

Then his world began to change for the better. He quickly received a phone call from Phillip Wynn, an RN Case Manager with the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (JCMVAMC) OEF/OIF/OND Combat Care Team.

"Phillip said 'we need to get you into a VA clinic and get you seen by a doctor and get your housing situation figured out,'" he said. "He said 'we're here to help you.' He came up and picked me up and brought me to Muskogee."

Before Jarboe even arrived in Muskogee, Nanette Waller, the OEF/OIF/OND Program Manager, called a local apartment complex in Muskogee that agreed to rent an apartment to him in one month when a unit opened.

"I came down here and met with Phillip and Nanette and Louis Gibson (OEF/OIF/OND Transitional Patient Advocate)," he said. "They started getting me to the places that I needed to go for help."

The Combat Care Team, along with the JCMVAMC Homeless Program, helped Jarboe get a voucher for his apartment deposit and first month's rent through KI BOIS Community Action, Inc. in Muskogee. In the meantime, he stayed temporarily at the Gospel Rescue Mission in Muskogee.

Jarboe also began treatment for substance abuse and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at JCMVAMC.

"My life has done a 180 since I've actually been getting help," said Jarboe. "I'm actually a nicer guy. I joke more. I get along with people. I try to make new friends."

Jarboe also met with David Berry, the JCMVAMC Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program Manager, who offered him employment at the hospital as part of the Incentive Therapy program. Incentive Therapy is one of five CWT programs and provides a diversified work experience in a VA medical center for Veterans who exhibit a mental illness and/or physical impairments.

In early January, Jarboe was assigned to the Engineering Department. Because he had experience with heating and air, he was given the opportunity to work alongside the hospital's A/C equipment mechanics.

"I have amazing people that I work with and they give me advice and show me stuff that I didn't know," said Jarboe. "I've been watching these guys left and right, every time we go do something. I'm learning more and more about the commercial side of heating and air."

The Combat Care Team also helped Jarboe figure out a plan for the future and helped him enroll for the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

Jarboe was accepted to Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology in Okmulgee where he plans to complete an Associate's Degree in Applied Sciences specializing in Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Technology. He starts the program in May.

"After two years, I'll have my journeyman's license and my contractor's license," he said. "I'm also going to take a small business course there so I can own my own business. Everybody loves heating and air. You can't go wrong with it. It's a job that will never go away."

While Jarboe never expected to get stranded in Miami, Okla., he said his call to the Veterans Crisis Line probably saved his life.

"I probably wouldn't be here," he said. "I thought about suicide. If I had continued down the path that I was headed, I'd probably be in jail or worse."

He is grateful to VA and the VA employees who have helped him turn his life around.

"Within a month of me being down here in Muskogee, I had an apartment," he said. "I had a job. I had a plan to go back to school. All these people down here at the VA hospital have been a big help. They've given me a chance to do something again. Coming from the lowest point in my life to where I am now, it's just amazing how many miracles that have happened." ★

Oklahoma Woman Looks Back on Service with Pride

Story by Nathan Schaeffer, Public Affairs Specialist



After graduating from Northeastern State University in 1997 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, Venetta Douglas felt a calling to serve.

But Douglas, who was born in Muskogee, Okla. and grew up in Taft, also admitted that she was apprehensive about the rigors of Army Basic Combat Training and was unsure if she had what it took to become a soldier.

"I woke up one day and wondered if I can do this," said Douglas, who served in the Army from 1998 to 2004. "I have a cousin who is 4'11 and she was in the Army Reserve for 20 plus years. I thought, 'if she can do this, than I can do this.' It was a mental thing. I don't know unless I try."

With no prior experience shooting weapons, Douglas struggled during basic training to qualify on her rifle, which is a requirement to become a soldier.

"Initially, I struggled at the range shooting," said Douglas, who receives her health care at the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center. "I was the last person in my battalion in basic training to qualify. Everything else, I had mastered. It was frustrating. But finally, I got it."

During the basic training graduation ceremony, Douglas was filled with pride at her accomplishment.

"I felt pride that I could wear the uniform and serve my country," she said. "It's the whole prideful thing of 'I did this.'"

After basic training, Douglas com-

pleted training for her new job in warehouse supply and was sent to Kitzingen, Germany where she served from July 1999 to July 2001. Her job was to order supplies for Army units stationed throughout Europe and then coordinate shipping.

"I ordered everything from fire extinguishers, pens, pencils, chemical lights, tape, parts and tools," she said. "I sent in the mass order and then it got processed in my warehouse and then we either shipped it out to the units or they came and picked it up."

Along with a desire to serve, Douglas wanted to see the world and that's exactly what she did. She took advantage of trips that were organized by the Army's Morale, Welfare and Recreation Office and visited the Czech Republic, Italy, London, Poland, Spain and Switzerland.

"I thought 'this may be a way I can see the world,'" said Douglas about her decision to enlist. "It served two purposes. I can serve in the military and say I did this and I can see the world. Then I wanted to deploy because I guess I felt like that was part of being in the military and serving."

After Germany, Douglas was assigned to the 31st Air Defense Artillery Brigade, 3rd Battalion 2nd Air Defense Artillery at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Shortly after the Nation was attacked on Sept. 11, 2001, she deployed to Ahmed Al Jaber Air Base in Kuwait, located 75 miles south of the Iraqi border, from February 2002 to September 2002. Then she deployed a second time to Al Udeid Air Base in Doha, Qatar during February 2003 to June 2003.

During both deployments, her battalion operated Patriot anti-aircraft missiles in those countries to protect American forces stationed in the region. Her job was to ensure her battalion had the supplies it needed to perform its mission.

"I ordered everything from tool boxes, water, MREs to bobbed wire," she said. "When you deploy, you take everything with you. Then sometimes you can't bring back what's taken. So when you get back, you have to reorder all the things you lost."

Looking back on her six years in the Army and the two deployments, Douglas has no regrets about her service.

"I'm grateful to have served my country and to have deployed and seen the world," said Douglas, who has been employed as Probation Officer for Tulsa County since 2006. "I'm grateful to have learned a job and all the wonderful people that I've met. So overall, it was a rewarding experience." ★

Honoring Our Women Veterans

March is Women's History Month and VA salutes our women Veterans for their accomplishments and contributions to society. For generations, women Veterans have honorably served in the military, and their successes don't stop when they take off the uniform.

Women Veterans are leaders – they have broken barriers for the generations that have followed and capitalized on the many leadership opportunities afforded by military service.

VA is committed to providing our Nation's more than 2 million women Veterans the outstanding health care, benefits and services they deserve for their service to America.

In Fiscal Year 2013, VA provided unprecedented support to women Veterans:

- More than 329,000 received compensation benefits, a nine percent increase from 2012
- 122,000 received education benefits, a 14 percent increase from 2012
- More than 17,000 were admitted to the vocational rehabilitation and employment program, an eight percent increase from 2012
- Nearly 33,000 received \$1.9 billion in home loan guaranty benefits

Through outreach and education efforts, VA is working to increase those numbers. For information on services available to women Veterans, visit <http://www.va.gov/womenvet>.

Veterans can also learn more about services for women Veterans by contacting Susie Hartsell, JCMVAMC Women Veterans Program Manager, at 918-577-4277.

A man with short blonde hair, wearing a black sleeveless shirt and blue shorts, is running on a dirt path. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background consists of green trees and foliage.

Tulsa Veteran is Boston Strong

Story by Nathan Schaeffer, Public Affairs Specialist

*Air Force Veteran
Gary Britt runs
outdoors.*

During 1969-1970, Air Force Veteran Gary Britt deployed to the Southeast Asian country of Thailand to support military operations in Vietnam. As part of his supply duties, Britt developed film that was shot by U.S. planes over the skies of Vietnam.

Only 25 years old at that time, Britt was a smoker and social drinker. But an evening at a bar in Bangkok with his Air Force buddies changed the rest of his life. He began coughing as a result of his smoking habit and he made the decision to immediately quit and get in shape.

"I realized I was already getting a smoker's cough," said Britt, who receives his health care through the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center. "That night I realized at 25 years old, if this is already affecting me like this, what will it be like at 45 years old? It will kill me. So I threw away my cigarettes that night and I started running."

More than 42 years later, the 67-year-old is still running. Throughout his life, he estimates that he has run more than 40,000 miles and more than 300 races, including many marathons.

On April 21, Britt participated in the 118th Boston Marathon, the world's oldest and most prestigious marathon.

Britt was inspired to run in the marathon due to last year's terrorist attacks that killed three and injured 264 others at the race's finish line.

In the aftermath of the bombings, the city of Boston rallied to demonstrate to the world that they would not live in fear and future marathons would take place. The defiant rallying cry led to the popular motto "Boston Strong."

"It was one of those defining moments that showed the backbone and strength of this country," he said prior to the marathon. "I think there's so many people who want to prove that (the bombings are) not going to stop this country from doing what we have the freedom and the right to do. So I think it's going to be very emotional."

This year was Britt's second time participating in the marathon. He previously completed it in 2009.



Air Force Veteran Gary Britt and his wife, Jan Britt. Every Veterans Day, Gary wears his uniform to the Tulsa Veterans Day Parade.

"Boston is the most elite marathon in the world," said Britt. "Anyone who runs Boston has to first go run another marathon and qualify with a certain time to even make an application."

In fact, Boston is the only marathon in the world where runners must first qualify. Britt not only qualified, he ran the 26 miles and 385 yards in 3 hours and 37 minutes. For his age group, 65 to 69, Britt had to run the race in 4 hours.

"My goal is to try and run a 3 hour and 30 minute marathon," he said prior to the race.

While he didn't meet his goal, he said he was honored to represent Veterans by wearing a Vietnam Veteran shirt.

"What an emotional day," he said immediately after the race. "Every part of my body hurts, but it's worth every ache."

After Boston, there are several other prestigious marathons still on his 'to do' list.

"I still want to go do the Air Force Marathon because I was in the Air Force," he said. "I've always wanted to do the Marine Corps Marathon. I want to do the New York City Marathon. Those are three that are still on my bucket list to do."

For Britt, running is not only a form of mental therapy, but it also keeps him in tip top shape. He typically runs six miles per day and has run every single day for the past two years.

"I'm 67 years old and I take absolutely nothing (medication)," he said. "Part of that is just being blessed with good genes, but part of that also has to be what you're doing with your body each day."

He said his goal is not to live longer,

but to have a better quality of life as he ages.

"I may not live one day longer than the person who does nothing," he said. "But every day I live will be a healthier and better day."

While he's not in as good of shape as he was in his 30's, he's satisfied with his health.

"I'm in great shape right now for my age," said Britt. "I can't run like I could 35 years ago. There's no way, because I was running six-minute miles or less back then. I can't do that now. But I can still run under eight-minute miles."

While most people may not be able to run a marathon, Britt says they can still get active and improve their health no matter their age.

"Just take one step today," he said. "Tomorrow, take two steps. Then the next day take three steps. Pretty soon you'll find out that you're up to a mile."

Before you get started, Britt said you have to first set goals for your physical fitness.

"We have to continually have goals in our life," he said. "Those goals can be written down or in your head. Without a goal, you're just going to drift."

He stressed that getting back in shape won't happen overnight.

"We as Americans want to get in shape," he said. "But we want to get in shape by this weekend. It doesn't work that way. It took you a lot of years to get in the shape you're in and it will take you some time to get back in shape. Just get up off the couch and go walk down the block and then the next day walk two blocks." ★

Day of Survival Inspires a Veteran's Poem

Story and photo by Nathan Schaeffer, Public Affairs Specialist

May 31, 2013 was the worst day of Navy Veteran Thomas Easley, Jr.'s life.

Easley was driving west to El Reno, Okla. along Interstate 40 from his job in Tuttle when he noticed dark clouds in the distance.

He scanned the radio for weather news and learned that a massive tornado had been spotted on the ground just outside of El Reno.

Believing that the tornado would travel northeast, Easley made the decision to turn around on Interstate 40 and flee east in the opposite direction.

The tornado, which the National Weather Service later reported was an EF-5 and 2.6 miles wide, quickly trapped him on the Interstate and the nearly 300-mile-per-hour winds sucked him out of the driver's side door.

"All the glass imploded because of the pressure and then the door flew open like it was trying to tear the door off and I fell out of the car," said Easley. "It's a good thing because the car went on down the road somewhere and then it ran into the hill and the whole thing was bashed in."

He headed for the nearby median bar-

rier and grabbed a piece of metal wire.

"There was nowhere else to go," said Easley. "I just held on and rode the storm out."

But with so much debris flying in the air, Easley was struck on multiple parts of his body and badly injured.

Whether pure luck or divine intervention, a SUV with four strangers quickly

Those guys knew what they were doing. It was like they were medically trained, because they kept me awake. They were right up in my face keeping me awake, wrapping my leg up."

Bleeding badly, Easley was convinced he was going to die.

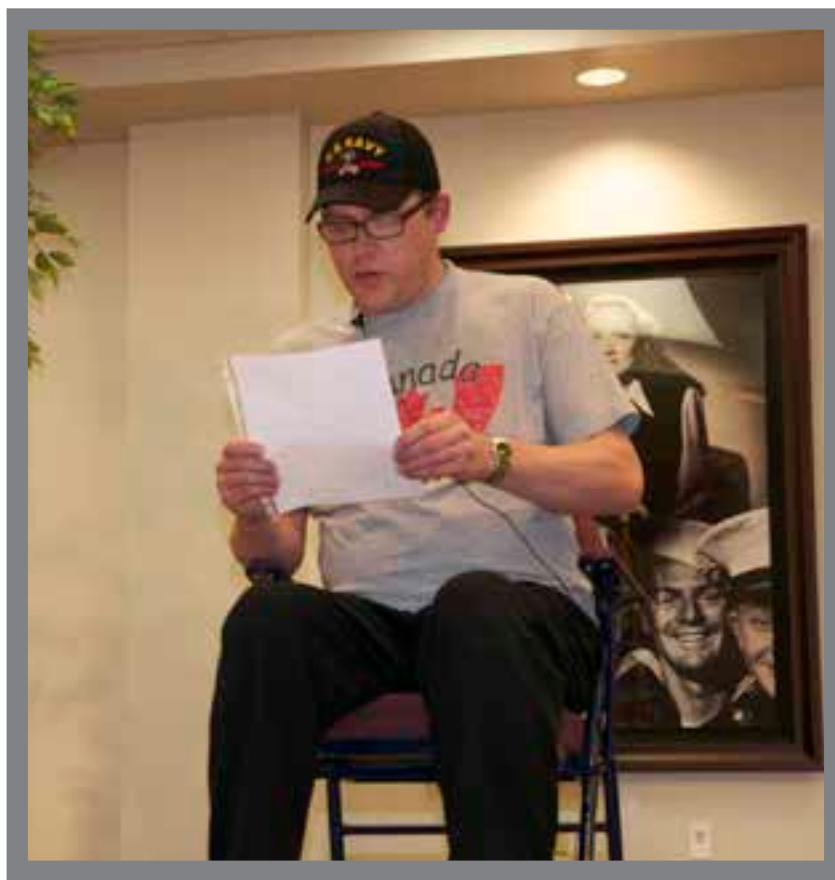
"I was getting real dizzy," he said. "I couldn't breathe very well. I really thought I was on my way out, but I'm still here by the grace of God or something. I don't know how. It wasn't my time yet I guess."

In the months following his injury, Easley has had multiple surgeries and physical therapy. He spent four months in a wheelchair and can only walk today with the help of a prosthetic brace.

Without anyone to serve as a caregiver for him, he was forced to move from El Reno to Muskogee to live with his mother. In November 2013, he began outpatient physical therapy at the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (JCMVAMC).

To cope with his injuries and new physical limitations, Easley turned to something that has helped him all his life, writing.

"It's a (way to relieve stress)," he said. "It's therapy for me and always has



Navy Veteran Thomas Easley, Jr. reads his poem "A Twist of Nature," which he entered in the JCMVAMC Veterans Creative Arts Competition on Feb. 4.

arrived after the tornado passed and took him to a hospital in El Reno.

"I don't know who picked me up," he said. "There were four guys in a SUV and they took me to the ER and just dropped me off and then headed out.

been, even before this accident.”

Easley began writing a book about his story of survival and recovery and hopes to get the book published.

In December 2013, he also wrote a poem called “A Twist of Nature,” which is also inspired by his story of survival and the destructive power of tornadoes.

“I think a lot of people could relate to it, because I’m not the only one who has been injured and stuck in a wheelchair for a good while,” he said.

When Easley heard that JCMVAMC was holding their annual Veterans Creative Arts Competition on Feb. 3-4, he decided to enter his poem.

Each year, Veterans treated at VA facilities have the opportunity to compete in a local creative arts competition that includes more than 170 art, music, dance, drama and creative writing categories. Entries are submitted to a national committee, which chooses first, second and third place winners among all of the entries.

Select winners are then invited to attend the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, which will be held Oct. 27 to Nov. 2, 2014 in Milwaukee, Wis.

Easley said he hopes his poem will earn him a trip to the national festival.

“It would be neat to go and experience the festival in Milwaukee,” said Easley, who served from 1991 to 1995.

“It would be awesome. I would love to meet all the different people and see how their writing styles are. We’ll see. It would be nice to go up there.”

While Easley has a long road of recovery still in front of him, he is optimistic and said his injuries have given him more time to write – something he loves to do.

“Since I’ve been disabled, I’ve gotten back into (writing) a bit and that’s a good thing,” he said. “Things happen for a reason. It was probably meant for me to slow down and start writing some more.” ★

A Twist of Nature

By Thomas Easley, Jr.

*My color is usually white, black or grey
I am of such a deadly type, while creatures large and small should frightfully keep away
I twist about, hop and spin with such a grotesque look
My base is sometimes very gigantic and I possess a prehensile hook
Observe how I mow across the terrain tossing debris here and there,
Creating such a loud and whining noise precipitating a unique stench up into the air
Through a brutal act of nature, I am unstoppable and disturbing,
And disrupt people’s everyday lives, to man I’m so very perturbing
Particular conditions must exist for me to rear my ugly head
If man doesn’t respect my boundaries, then he most likely should count himself as dead
Popping up in any area of the land whether winter, spring or fall,
I don’t discriminate where or when I strike, perhaps will show up in them all
I get measured on a scale depending on how much I destroy,
Creating something of a war zone, although weapons I do not deploy
So when you start to hear the wind, vilely whistle and blow,
And as you witness the roof peeled from your house,
Then I’m among you, for I am a tornado*

Father and Son Hike for Veterans Retreat

Story by Nathan Schaeffer, Public Affairs Specialist

For the past 10 years, Air Force Veteran Kevin Steele has dreamed of hiking the Appalachian Trail, which stretches across 14 states and is officially 2,185 miles long.

“All over the world, people want to hike the Appalachian Trail,” said Steele, who lives in Eufaula, Okla. “If they enjoy the outdoors, it is on every one of their bucket lists to come to America and hike the trail.”

Steele’s enthusiasm for hiking rubbed off on his son, Hunter. During Hunter’s freshman year in high school, he asked his father if the two of them could someday hike the entire Appalachian Trail after reading a book his father owned about the trek.

Steele promised that they would do the hike after Hunter graduated from high school, which Hunter completed in May 2013.

“It was always one of those things that I knew I’d have to put off until after I retire,” he said. “But when my son asked me if we could go do it; that nailed me down.”

For the past two years, father and son have been planning for the hike and the two have gone on numerous overnight hiking trips to test their equipment.

But Steele, who served on active duty in the Air Force from 1988 to 1992, Air Force Reserve from 1992 to 1997 and then the Oklahoma Air National Guard until 2003, also wanted the journey to serve a larger purpose beyond a bonding experience with his son.

He wanted the trip to serve as a fundraiser for a Veterans’ charity. When he began researching charities, he found Active Heroes, a non-profit based in Louisville, Ky., that strives to reduce suicide among Veterans.





Air Force Veteran Kevin Steele (right) and his son Hunter on March 18 on the Appalachian Trail.

Active Heroes offers programs for Veterans such as physical and mental therapy, home repairs and community outreach, financial assistance and community reintegration. The charity is also building a 140-acre retreat for Veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or a Traumatic Brain Injury.

In June 2013, the Steele family drove to Louisville to meet with the charity which led to the fundraising campaign "Hike for Heroes 2014." The hike will strive to raise \$100,000 for the retreat. Active Heroes also received a \$250,000 grant from Home Depot for the retreat and is scheduled to break ground on May 30.

"This charity, their sole purpose is suicide prevention," said Steele. "Every member of the board has been touched by suicide by a Veteran family member who has committed suicide. That is their sole purpose and that's the reason for this retreat."

Steele resigned from his job at the Muskogee VA Regional Office in February and began the hike on March 17 in Spring Mountain, Ga. The hikers hope to average 15 miles per day and hope to complete the hike in six months.

"That will get you there in 150 days," said Steele. "Since we're giving ourselves six months, we'll have an extra 30 days to relax and enjoy the trail towns along the way and also raise awareness for the charity."

The two will either sleep in a tent or at shelters, which are located every eight to 10 miles.

"We will have a tent with us," said Steele. "We want the option to be able to sleep anywhere and anytime we want. If we get into a real bad rainstorm, we'll pop the tent up and stay dry."

Steele will purchase food and supplies in "trail towns" along the route while his wife will also mail supplies to designated collection points.

"We'll hit a trail town about every 40 to 70 miles where we can resupply,"



he said. "About a half dozen places, we will have a drop box for us. My wife and daughter, they're going to handle everything back (in Oklahoma) and when we reach certain points, they will ship out a box to us."

Kevin and Hunter are thrilled to set out on their adventure.

"It's going to be the adventure of a lifetime," said Steele. "Everything about it is attractive to us. It has its own culture to it. You'll meet friends and they'll be like family members for the rest of your life."

Every day, they will provide updates on their website, www.HikeForHeroes2014.org, and Facebook page, www.facebook.com/HikeForHeroes2014.

"We are going to video something every single day," said Steele. "We want people to stay involved and stay interested and that's only going to help us raise the money."

If you would like to support the Hike for Heroes 2014 and help build the Veterans Retreat, visit their website at www.HikeForHeroes2014.org and click on the donate button.

"Every penny will go towards the retreat," said Steele. "When someone clicks the donate button, it sends them over to the Active Heroes website and it's earmarked specifically for the retreat. We're losing 22 Veterans per day to suicide. We're asking folks to donate \$22 in memory of the 22 Veterans we're going to lose that day." ★



Air Force Veteran Kevin Steele (right) and his son Hunter enter North Carolina on April 6, 2014 after hiking through Georgia.



A typical three-sided shelter found on the Appalachian Trail.

12 Facts About the Appalachian Trail



1. The Appalachian Trail is one of the longest continuously marked footpaths in the world, measuring roughly 2,180 miles in length.
2. The Trail goes through 14 states along the crests and valleys of the Appalachian mountain range from the southern terminus at Springer Mountain, Ga., to the Trail's northern terminus at Katahdin, Me.
3. "Thru-hikers" walk the entire Trail in a continuous journey. "Section-hikers" piece the entire Trail together over years.
4. Known as the "A.T.," it has been estimated that 2-3 million people visit the Trail every year and about 1,800-2,000 people attempt to "thru-hike" the Trail.
5. Only 1 in 4 who attempt a thru-hike successfully completes the journey.
6. Thousands of volunteers contribute roughly 220,000 hours to the A.T. every year.
7. More than 250 three-sided shelters exist along the Trail.
8. Virginia is home to the most miles of the Trail (about 550), while West Virginia is home to the least (about four).
9. Maryland and West Virginia are the easiest states to hike, while New Hampshire and Maine are considered the hardest.
10. The total elevation gain of hiking the entire A.T. is equivalent to climbing Mt. Everest 16 times.
11. The A.T. is home to an impressive diversity of plants and animals. Some animals you may see include black bears, moose, porcupines, snakes, woodpeckers and salamanders. Some plants you may encounter include jack-in-the-pulpit, skunk cabbage and flame azalea.
12. Most thru-hikers walk north, starting in Georgia in spring and finishing in Maine in fall, taking an average of 6 months.

Helping Veterans Achieve a Healthy Weight

By Katrina Wafford, VA Dietician

Many of us struggle to achieve a healthy weight or eat properly. The VA has a patient-centered program called MOVE! that can assist Veterans in improving eating habits and achieving a healthy weight.

First, you need to assess if you are ready for some changes to improve your overall health. Visiting with a VA dietician can help you assess your readiness for lifestyle changes.

If you are, then focusing on small steps can lead to an opportunity to open doors for better health. For example: try to focus on a positive goal, such as eating one serving of fresh fruit as a snack four times a week, or walking 10 minutes three times a week.

Remember, set reasonable goals.

VA dietitians can help you start with reasonable goals. Some of the things we may look at deeper is meal preparation and cooking methods, alternative seasonings, food choices or portion control.

Remember balancing intake (food) and output (exercise) is a major factor in achieving a healthy weight. Drinking and eating fewer calories can assist in weight loss. If you are not active, further calorie restriction may be necessary.

The MOVE! program offers group or individual classes in Muskogee, Tulsa and Vinita. It can also be offered via video-conference to our Hartshorne Clinic. Individual appointments are offered based on clinic availability and patient preference.

Group classes are held once a week in each location for a total of eight weeks. Classes are available as a morning session or afternoon session in Muskogee and Tulsa. Vinita has only one session during the day.

MOVE! incorporates a multi-disciplinary approach including the dietician, physical therapist, pharmacist and healthy behavior coordinator. Some topics covered are habit assessment, setting smart goals, meal planning, exercise, label reading, stress and emotional eating, grocery shopping, recipe modifications, eating out and medications.

If interested in the MOVE! Program, call the Nutrition Department at 918-577-3214 and we will get you started down the path to a new you! ★



Lifestyle Changes Can Lower Your Risk For Heart Disease

By Pam Benson, Health Promotion Disease Prevention Program Manager

Hearth disease may be a leading cause of death, but that doesn't mean you have to accept it as your fate. Although you lack the power to change some risk factors — such as family history, sex or age — there are some key heart disease prevention steps you can take.

Stop Smoking. Smoking or using tobacco of any kind is one of the most significant risk factors for developing heart disease. Chemicals in tobacco can damage your heart and blood vessels, leading to narrowing of the arteries (atherosclerosis). Carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke replaces some of the oxygen in your blood, which increases your blood pressure and heart rate by forcing your heart to work harder to supply enough oxygen. No amount of smoking is safe and the more you smoke, the greater your risk. The good news is that when you quit smoking, your risk of heart disease drops almost to that of a nonsmoker in about five years. And no matter how long or how much you smoked, you'll start reaping rewards as soon as you quit.

Getting some regular, daily exercise can reduce your risk of fatal heart disease. When you combine physical activity with other lifestyle measures, such as maintaining a healthy weight, the payoff is even greater. Physical activity helps you control your weight and can reduce your chances of developing other conditions that may put a strain on your heart, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. Just 30 minutes or less of physical activity offers heart benefits. You can even get the same health benefits if you break up your workout time into three 10-minute sessions most days of the week.

Eating a healthy diet can reduce your risk of heart disease. A diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains can help protect your heart. Beans and other low-fat sources of protein and certain types of fish can also reduce your

risk of heart disease. Limiting certain fats you eat is important such as red meat, dairy products, coconut and palm oils. You also need to limit deep fried fast foods, bakery products, packaged snack food, margarines and crackers. Most people need to add more fruits and vegetables to their diet — with a goal of five to 10 servings a day. Eating that many fruits and vegetables will not only help prevent heart disease but may help prevent cancer and improve diabetes.

Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight, especially if you carry excess weight around your middle, ups your risk of heart disease. Excess weight can lead to conditions that increase your chances of heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. Men are considered overweight if their waist measurement is greater than 40 inches and women are overweight if their waist measurement is greater than 35 inches. Even a small weight loss can be beneficial. Reducing your weight by just 5 to 10 percent can help decrease your blood pressure, lower your blood cholesterol level and reduce your risk of diabetes.

Get enough sleep. Sleep deprivation can do more than leave you yawning throughout the day; it can harm your health. People who don't get enough sleep have a higher risk of obesity, high blood pressure, heart attack, diabetes and depression. Most adults need seven to nine hours of sleep each night. If you wake up without your alarm clock and you feel refreshed, you're getting enough sleep. But, if you're constantly reaching for the snooze button and it's a struggle to get out of bed, you need more sleep each night. Make sleep a priority in your life. Set a sleep schedule and stick to it by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day. Keep your bedroom dark and quiet, so it's easier to sleep. If you feel like you've been getting enough sleep, but you're still tired throughout the day, ask your doctor if you need to be evaluated for sleep apnea.

Get regular health screenings. High blood pressure and high cholesterol can damage your heart and blood vessels. But without testing for them, you probably won't know whether you have these conditions. Regular screening can tell you what your numbers are and whether you need to take action.

So, start today to get Heart Healthy and avoid heart problems in the future by adopting a healthy lifestyle. ★

MOVE! Program & Healthy Living Calendar

Weight Management Program (MOVE!)

If you are carrying extra weight, losing weight and keeping it off can be one of the best things you can do to protect

your health. Excess weight puts you at risk for problems like heart disease, diabetes, some cancers, sleep apnea and gallstones. The best way to manage your weight is to eat wisely and be as physically active as possible.

VA offers the MOVE! Program, a weight self-management program for Veterans who want to improve their health. The first step is to let your VA Primary Care team know that you are interested in MOVE!

For more information about the following MOVE! and Healthy Living classes, please call 918-577-3214.



MOVE! Introduction Class

Provides an introduction to MOVE!, VA's weight self-management program.

Muskogee: Mondays, excluding federal holidays, at 2 p.m. in the MOVE/Nutrition office located on the 2nd floor.

Tulsa: Mondays, excluding federal holidays, at 1 p.m. in the Boomer/Sooner Room.



MOVE! Group Class

Learn how to improve your eating, exercise and behavior habits.

Muskogee: Wednesdays, excluding federal holidays, from 10:30 - 11:30 a.m. and 3 - 4 p.m. in the auditorium.

Tulsa: Tuesdays, excluding federal holidays, at 10-11 a.m. or 1-2 p.m. in the Boomer/Sooner Room.

Vinita: Thursdays, excluding federal holidays, at 12:30 p.m - 1:30 p.m. in the Conference Room by appointment only, class size limited.

MOVE! Support Group

Receive support from other Veterans who have participated in the MOVE! Program.

Tulsa and Vinita: Fourth Thursday of the month at 2 p.m. in the Boomer/Sooner Room (Tulsa) and Conference Room (Vinita).

Healthy Living Classes

Cooking Education Program

This program provides hands on experience and helps Veterans become more independent and responsible for their nutritional care.

Muskogee: Wednesdays in the hospital auditorium, excluding federal holidays, at 9 a.m.



Diabetes/Pre-Diabetic Education

Learn survival skills for living with diabetes and improving eating habits to reduce risks. No referral is needed and spouses are encouraged to attend.

Muskogee: Tuesdays, excluding federal holidays, at 1 p.m. in the MOVE/Nutrition office located on the 2nd floor.

Tulsa: Mondays, excluding federal holidays, at 10 a.m. in the Boomer/Sooner Room.



Lipid Education

Learn how to improve your heart health through lifestyle changes.

Muskogee: Offered on an individual basis.

Tulsa: First and Third Thursday, excluding federal holidays, at 2 p.m. in the Sooner Room.



Nutrition & Wellness

Learn the basics of nutrition.

Muskogee: Offered on an individual basis.

Tulsa: Fourth Monday of the month at 1:30 p.m. in the Sooner Room.

Veterans Open Art Studio/Writing Workshop

The Open Art Studio and Writing Workshop gives Veterans an opportunity to create art or write and socialize with other Veterans.

Muskogee: Mondays, excluding federal holidays, from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. in the auditorium. Contact Deborah Moreno at 918-577-4014 for more information.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1

Veterans Crisis Line

Confidential chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net or text to 838255

The Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center and Hartshorne, Tulsa and Vinita VA Outpatient Clinics served approximately 37,000 Veterans from a 25-county area in Eastern Oklahoma in 2012.



Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center (Muskogee)
918-577-3000 or toll free at 1-888-397-8387



Jack C. Montgomery East (Muskogee)
918-577-3699



Behavioral Medicine Service Clinic (Tulsa)
918-610-2000



Ernest Childers VA Outpatient Clinic (Tulsa)
918-628-2500
or toll free at 1-888-398-8387



Hartshorne VA Outpatient Clinic
888-878-1598



Vinita VA Outpatient Clinic
918-713-5400

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